

Favorite by pathvain_aelien

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-01

Updated: 2017-12-01

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:07:17

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 8,833

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eleven chooses a favorite.

Favorite

“Hey, El. What’s your favorite color?”

The guys and Eleven are hanging out in Mike’s basement, although they aren’t exactly hanging out with each other. Mike and Eleven are leafing through a D&D manual. He is patiently teaching her, getting her ready for their impending campaign. The other guys were helping—or trying to, until Mike took over. Dustin’s eyes had been bugging out with excitement and Lucas kept arguing with Mike. Eleven was feeling confused anyway, and arguing over rules didn’t exactly help clarify anything for her. Mike had snapped at them to just go do something else, anything, for awhile, and Hopper’s eye had started twitching alarmingly, so Lucas and Dustin gave up. They are currently playing Battleship and Hopper’s napping on the couch again. Eleven can see that her friends are still staring in her direction, clearly struggling to hold back helpful tips. Will is stretched out on the floor, drawing a picture to decorate Eleven’s room. He’s noticed that her room is still pretty bare and thinks it will make it look homier for her.

Eleven turns in her chair to regard him. “Favorite...color?” she asks. Will stops drawing and holds up the box of crayons. She looks at them.

“Yeah, what’s your favorite?”

She doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, but that doesn’t strike anyone as unusual. She usually takes a few seconds (or more) before responding to anything. Communication is still a new concept for her.

“Favorite?” She repeats.

“Yeah...favorite.” Will looks at Mike for guidance, but Mike is still flipping through his book.

“What is favorite?”

Lucas and Dustin immediately turn to gawk and Mike closes the book with a snap. Will looks shocked. They all do. Eleven notices and

lowers her eyes. Clearly, favorite is something that she is supposed to know. Will makes eye contact with Dustin, gives his head a tiny shake. Thankfully, he seems to understand.

“Dude. It’s your turn! Go, damn it!” he snaps at Lucas, jerking his chin towards the game and widening his eyes meaningfully. Lucas stops gawping at Eleven and turns his attention back to the game. He knows they aren’t supposed to just freak out every time she doesn’t know something, but it’s kind of hard to control sometimes. Will’s already gone back to drawing, as if he’s lost interest in the question.

Eleven looks at Mike, a little worriedly. He gives her a half-smile. “No big deal, really,” he says. “It’s always okay to ask questions.” He says it gently, because she still looks anxious. She relaxes a little. “Favorite means that you like something best.”

“Like what best?”

“Anything. You can have a favorite anything. Like...your favorite snack is Eggos. Right? Because you like Eggos best.”

She nods her comprehension. She definitely likes Eggos best. “I need to have favorites?” It’s half a question, half a statement.

“Well, no, you don’t have to. You don’t have to have favorites for everything. I mean, you don’t even need to have a favorite at all if you don’t want to. Or you can have more than one favorite. Like...my favorite thing to do is play D&D. But playing video games is also my favorite. And hanging out with you guys. And reading. So I actually have a lot of favorite activities.”

“Yeah,” Dustin says, looking up from Battleship. “And I have a favorite snack. You know what that is, right, El?” He smirks at Mike. Ever since Dustin and Eleven hung out at his house a few days ago, he can’t resist teasing Mike about it. About her.

“Yes. Nilla wafers.”

“Yep! And I have three favorite movies. You know what those are?”

She smiles a little. “Star Wars.”

“Yeah, so that could be like, one favorite, since it’s one big story, or three favorites, since they’re three separate movies.”

Lucas immediately retorts, “You can’t count them as one big movie, Dustin. Each one has its own plot.”

“Yeah, but there’s one main storyline that’s resolved at the end.”

“But each one could be seen as a stand-alone movie, because—“

Will throws his crayons down irritably. Once an argument starts about Star Wars, it can go on for hours. Many hours. Will abandons his drawing and sits at the table next to Mike and Eleven. “Ignore them,” he tells her. He has to speak loudly to be heard over their bickering.

She smiles at him but she’s still thinking about favorites. How many favorites does she need to have? Mike said favorites are for everything. Anything. That means she needs a lot of favorites. She looks at the table consideringly. The remains of their lunch are spread out on the table. She notices there are two different kinds of plates. Three of the plates are blue and white. Two of them are green. Is she supposed to have a favorite plate? She doesn’t really like one more than the other. Do other people have that many favorites? The thought makes her feel a little sad. It’s just a reminder that she’s not like them. Not like anyone else. It makes her feel very lonely.

Mike’s watching her stare at the table. Her face looks bleak and it hurts something inside him to see it. “You don’t have to have favorites at all, if you don’t want. And you don’t need favorites for stupid stuff,” he says, because she’s staring at the plates. “Favorites aren’t something that you just make up, just to say you have one. You know? It’s just something that happens. Like the way you ended up liking Eggos. You didn’t just say, ‘hey, I need to pick something I like best,’ and randomly grabbed some Eggos. You actually really liked them the best. You know?”

She nods, smiles a little.

“And you don’t have to pick favorites all at once. Just when you decide you like something best, that thing could end up being your

favorite for awhile.”

“For awhile?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t have to be permanent,” Will adds. “My favorite song used to be “Under Pressure”, but now it’s “Should I Stay or Should I Go”. Because I ended up liking that one better once I heard it.”

“Understand?” Mike asks her, and she nods.

“Yes. Thank you.” They smile at each other. She includes Will in her smile. Lucas and Dustin go back to their game, argument temporarily forgotten.

“Hopper’s favorite TV show is Days of Our Lives,” Dustin mutters to him, and they both giggle until Hopper rolls over to stare at them menacingly.

Will scoops up the crayon box and his drawing and brings them back to the table, since it seems like Mike is done with D&D lessons for now. Mike moves a couple of plates out of the way to make room. Eleven watches him draw, hair hanging in his face. His forehead is wrinkled with concentration and she glances down at the drawing.

“So, is there a color you like best?” he asks her, looking up briefly. “It’s okay if you don’t. Maybe you could just tell me if you hate a color, and I won’t use that one.”

She smiles at him. “I have a favorite.” And she does. It’s the color of her first warm clothes. Mike’s sweatshirt. His jacket. The clothes that briefly became hers. “Blue,” she says, and he rifles through the box of crayolas.

“That looks pretty,” she tells him honestly. He grins up at her, still coloring.

“Thanks.”

“Lucas. I hate this game,” Dustin says snippily.

“You only hate it because you’re losing,” Lucas snaps back at him. “This is my favorite game, we’re playing it. The end.”

“How is that fair?”

“We played your stupid favorite game last time,” he points out, and Dustin sighs.

“Maybe we should take a break.”

“Yeah? And what exactly do you want to do, instead?”

“I don’t know. Snacks?”

“And this has nothing to do with you losing.”

“No. I just want ice cream. I will happily return to the freaking game, and lose, after ice cream.”

“Fiiiine,” Lucas sighs, and pushes Battleship to one side. “I do like ice cream.”

“MIKE!” Dustin screeches.

Mike cranes his neck. “What? You don’t have to shout, I’m right here.”

“The kid has a point,” Hopper mumbles. He’s already regretting chaperoning, but reminds himself that the last time he didn’t, Eleven just walked back and forth between all of their damned houses all day long, without his knowledge.

“Ice cream!”

“We don’t have any!” Now he’s screeching, too, as if they are on opposite sides of a field instead of in the same room and merely feet away from each other. Hopper throws an arm over his face and groans.

“Are you shitting me? You guys always have ice cream.”

“And we did. Until you and Lucas ate it, yesterday.”

“Shit.”

Lucas and Dustin regard each other sadly.

“Popsicles?” Lucas asks suddenly. Hopefully.

“No. You guys ate those, too. Monday.”

“Jesus. Shouldn’t your mom be making a grocery run soon?”

Mike gives him an exasperated look. “Yes, Dustin, she will. She will buy a ton of snacks for you guys to devour, tomorrow. And you just had lunch, anyway.”

“We’re hungry now,” Dustin complains, but Mike only shrugs.

“Go to the store, then.”

“I don’t have my bike. Hopper picked us up, remember?” Shit. Hopper. Dustin and Lucas immediately make meaningful eye contact. Lucas gestures with his chin, and Dustin sighs.

“Hey. Hop.”

“Don’t call me that,” Hopper says faintly. The words are a little muffled because he’s placed his hat over his face.

“Hopper.”

Hopper doesn’t bother responding.

“We need to make a snack run.”

“Go ahead.”

“Dude. You said you’d drive us.”

“To Mike’s. I said I’d drive you to Mike’s. And you’re here. My work is done.”

Lucas sighs and Dustin mutters something that sounds like grumpy old asshole. They both look around the room, as if the ice cream will suddenly descend from the ceiling. Lucas’s gaze falls on Eleven, who is sorting crayolas. He grins, an idea forming. He nudges Dustin to shut up the angry muttering.

“Hey, El!”

She turns to look at him, green crayon in hand.

“Yes?”

“Wouldn’t some ice cream sound good right about now?”

She nods. “Yes.” It would. She likes ice cream very much.

Lucas looks at Hopper’s prone form, but Hopper hasn’t moved. He faces Eleven again.

“So you want ice cream?”

She nods again, a little confused. “...yes?”

“That’s too bad,” Lucas says regretfully. “Because we don’t have any. We could go get some, but we’d need someone to drive us. Someone with a car. To get the ice cream.” He raises his eyebrows, to see if she gets it. She does. She immediately turns her attention to Hopper.

“Hopper.”

“What?”

“Ice cream.”

“Apparently we aren’t done working on your manners yet, kid,” he says without budging.

“Hopper. Ice cream, please.”

“A little better.”

“Hopper. I would like ice cream, please,” she says carefully. A little annoyed.

“That’s great. Good job.”

She waits, but he doesn’t move.

“Hopper.”

“Oh. I didn’t say I was actually going to drive you. Just that you

needed to work on your manners.” He pauses and feels her hovering over him. “I’m not going to drive you. You guys just had lunch. You are not in imminent danger of starvation and if you were, ice cream would not be helpful, anyway.”

The hat is suddenly ripped from his face and he squints one eye open. Sees Eleven, head lowered and staring at him. The look of intense concentration on her face. Mike and Will stand up hastily and crayolas spill across the table and onto the floor. Mike is torn between trying to intervene and staying safely on the sidelines. Dustin and Lucas retreat a little, looking excited.

This is going to be awesome.

“Eleven. I am not going to drive you to the store. And throwing a telekinetic fit about it is not going to convince me otherwise,” he snaps. He means it, but he has both eyes open now, because she looks pissed. They haven’t had a real fight in a long time, not since she came back from Chicago, but he hasn’t forgotten how bad they could get. He hopes that it won’t happen this time, but he’s doubtful. He can feel the power gathering in the room. It feels a little like static electricity. It seems to suck the air out of the room and Mike is starting to feel seriously alarmed. Hopper and Eleven seem to be forgetting they aren’t alone.

Eleven stares at Hopper intently and then forces herself to stop. To relax. She breathes deeply and regains control of herself. This is not like before. He is not keeping her away from her friends. This is okay. She will not use her power, not on him. The tenseness slowly leaves her and they can all see it go. Hopper relaxes. Only Dustin and Lucas look disappointed.

Eleven nods at Hopper. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes. You will not drive us.”

“Okay. Good. Good job, kid.” He means it. He knows how hard it is for her, how it sometimes just gets away from her.

“I will walk,” she says, and turns toward the door.

“Wait, what? Eleven! Where are you going?”

“To get ice cream,” she says, patiently. As if he’s a little slow.

“You can’t walk to the store! Alone!”

She turns to look at her friends. Mike grins at her and suddenly, they’re all behind her. They already have their backpacks on.

“You’re outvoted, man,” Dustin tells Hopper apologetically. “Sorry.”

Eleven throws the door open with her mind, and strides out without looking back. Hopper leaps off the couch. “Eleven! Come back here. I will drive you to the damned store,” he growls.

She pauses.

“Thank you,” she says softly. He’s still trying to be angry but it’s not working. He feels oddly proud of her instead. He will at least attempt to hide it under anger, so she doesn’t get the idea that she can just throw a fit and get whatever she wants, whenever she wants.

He glares at her, at her friends. “Well? What the hell are you waiting for? Get in the damn car!” Dustin and Lucas sprint towards the station wagon, Will follows more slowly. Hopper raises his eyebrows at Mike.

“Let me just tell my mom we’re leaving,” he says, already running up the stairs. Hopper puts an arm around Eleven and leads her to the car. Dustin’s settled himself into the passenger seat. He gives Hopper an ingratiating grin when Hopper slides behind the wheel. Hopper ignores him.

“Mom! Hey, mom!” Mike skids to a halt in front of his mother. Karen is feeding Holly. She barely glances up.

“Yes, Michael?”

“We’re going to the store to get ice cream.”

“Is the Chief driving you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s fine, then,” she tells him, as if he has asked her permission instead of just informing her. He starts for the front door but she calls him back.

“Wait! Honey, if you’re going to the store, would you mind doing the shopping? That way I don’t have to go tomorrow.” Mike shrugs. He doesn’t mind. They’ll already be there, anyway. And she usually lets him keep the change. She motions for him to grab the list off the fridge while she opens her wallet. Mike tucks it into his pocket, making a mental note to tell Hopper to go to Safeway. They shouldn’t go to the Big Buy. They might remember Eleven there.

That’s how Hopper is roped into grocery shopping for the Wheeler family. He’s still not sure how it happened. He’s pushing a cart with half of Karen’s list clutched in one hand, peering at jars of tomato sauce and trying to decipher her scratchy handwriting to see which brand she wants. Mike has the other half of the list, along with Eleven and Will. Dustin and Lucas are checking for new comics.

Eleven gazes around the store with interest. She’s been in a grocery store before, but she didn’t have time to really look around. And that store was only for food. This one has other things. Lots of other things. Hopper has given her a task. She is supposed to pick out the non-food things they will need. Hopper will get the food things while he’s shopping for Mike’s mom. She needs to get soap and shampoo, which is soap for hair. Hopper usually brings these things home, but she figures it can’t be that hard. Until she sees that a full aisle is devoted entirely to soap. And not even the hair soap kind.

“What kind?” Mike asks her. He’s already thrown Nancy’s favorite brand into the basket Will’s carrying. He doesn’t get a response so he glances at her. She’s gazing with wonder and a little doubt at the variety of soap.

“Oh. Well, you can just pick whatever you want, I guess,” he says.

“My favorite?” She asks him. Mike and Will both smile at her.

“Yeah. They have different smells so you just find one that you like. Here,” Mike says, grabbing a bar off the shelf. He glances at it. “This one is mint.” He hands it to her and she tentatively brings it up to her nose. She makes a face and they laugh.

“Probably too strong,” Will says, tossing it back onto the shelf. “What about this one? This is vanilla.” He sniffs it. “It smells like cupcakes,” he says. Then he glances at Mike. “They seriously make a soap that smells like food?” Mike shrugs and Will gives it to Eleven. She shakes her head and Will throws it onto a shelf. Not the one it came from, but oh well.

They’re getting into it now, having fun. Will drops the basket on the floor and they take turns smelling everything. Mike doesn’t think he’s ever spent so much time in this aisle before but it’s suddenly awesome. Eleven hands him a pink bar wrapped in plastic and he sniffs it. It’s rose-scented, apparently, although it doesn’t smell like a flower. It’s putrid. He sneezes immediately and she laughs. Will sniffs a bar of green soap a little too enthusiastically and gets dizzy.

“Ugh,” he says, thrusting the bar back onto the shelf and swaying slightly. “That’s it, I’m done. I’ll be over at the comics,” he says, leaving the basket on the floor as he heads down the aisle. Mike realizes they’ve been here for at least ten minutes and he hurriedly throws his mom’s soap into the basket. They all use different soap in the Wheeler house. Well, except for his dad. He just uses whatever soap’s left over.

Eleven picks up another soap. This one isn’t a bar; it’s in a plastic container. She opens the lid and sniffs it cautiously. It smells a little like the lemon chicken she had for lunch. The lemon part, not the chicken part. Then she inhales it again, because she recognizes the scent. It’s the Mike scent. He’s always smelled like it, at least as long as she’s known him. She first noticed it on the clothes he gave her when he brought her in from the rain. It’s a good smell. She closes the lid and gently places it in the basket.

“This one,” she says. He glances at it, and then laughs.

“Great minds think alike, I guess,” he tells her. “That’s the same kind I use.”

“I know,” she says, picking up another bottle and studying it.

Mike blushes immediately but she doesn’t notice. He isn’t sure what to say, or if there’s any reason to blush anyway. Although he can’t exactly control it, it just happens. A lot.

“Oh.” Maybe he should just let it go, although he’s extremely curious.
“How did you know?”

“It smells like you,” she says, as if it were obvious.

“Oh.” And now he really doesn’t know what to say. “Did you want it because you...aren’t sure what else to get?”

“No. I like the way you smell.”

And now he’s definitely turning red but he feels strangely elated. Although maybe she doesn’t mean anything by it, he tells himself. He likes the smell, too, that’s why he always picks it out. Idiot.

“Oh. Thanks. But, um. You could still pick a different one. If you wanted.” He doesn’t care what kind of soap she uses; he just wants to make sure she knows she can pick her own choice. Without being influenced by what he likes. She’s looking up at him with confusion.

“Why?”

“To have your own smell.” He sees the expression on her face and immediately understands. “Not that we can’t use the same one. We can, I don’t care. But you could have your own smell, if you wanted, and I could still have this one.” He can tell she’s still not getting it, she looks worried. Like she thinks he’ll be angry with her for picking the same soap. He mentally calls himself an idiot again and tries to reassure her.

“I mean, if it’s just that you like the smell but don’t like, necessarily want to smell like it, it’s not like it’s going anywhere. You can still smell me.” His face heats immediately. Jesus Christ, that sounds weird. His mind goes blank. It’s almost a mercy, actually. It seems like his synapses have malfunctioned due to his utter lameness. He’s also grateful for one thing. At least the guys are nowhere near them to witness this latest foolishness.

Dustin has been spying on them since Will left, and reporting back via super-comm. They had sincerely hoped Mike would take this rare opportunity alone to ask Eleven to the Snow Ball, and Dustin volunteered to check on the status. He cleared a couple of shelves by shoving everything over a few feet and he's been standing with his head about a foot away from the rack, the better to spy on them. They can't hear him, because he's been wearing his headset all day and when he speaks, he does it as quietly as possible.

"Dustin. Status report. What's going on? Over," Lucas barks from Aisle 3.

"Eleven has chosen a soap," Dustin mutters, holding his mouthpiece as close to his lips as possible. "Over."

"...That's it?"

There's a long pause and Dustin doesn't break it. "Dustin!"

"You didn't say 'over.' Over."

He hears Lucas sigh at the same time the conversation starts up again. He shushes Lucas quickly and listens as hard as he can, although he regrets that immediately because it's embarrassing. For Mike. For Dustin. For anyone in the vicinity, because it's horrible. He hears Mike, making a complete and total ass out of himself.

"Jesus Christ," he moans into the headpiece, completely forgetting to say 'over', too.

"What? Did he ask her to the ball? Over."

"No. No, he did not. He asked her something else. Over."

"What? What did he ask her? Did he ask her on a date? Over."

"No. He asked her to smell him. Over."

There's another long pause. "I don't think I heard you right. Over."

"Yep. Yeah. Yeah, you did, Lucas. Over."

“Like, a soap? He asked her opinion on a soap?” Lucas asks hopefully. He forgets to end the communication officially, but Dustin no longer cares.

“No. She wanted to get the soap he uses. He said she didn’t have to, because she could still smell him.”

“....”

“I know.”

“....”

“Yeah.”

“....”

“Yep.”

“Shit. Are you shitting me, Dustin?”

“I wish.”

“He is totally blowing it.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I mean, she actually likes him! How hard could it be to screw that up? She’s liked him since the day they met! She would have said yes, like, right away.”

“If he keeps going like this, she’s not going to come near him. Like, ever again.”

“She’ll probably regret ever coming back,” Lucas adds, and then Dustin hears Will’s voice. He sounds pissed.

“What are you guys doing? Stop it. Just give them some privacy, guys.” There’s a brief sound of scuffling before Lucas returns.

“Abort mission, Dustin, return to base. Over.”

Dustin doesn’t mind abandoning the mission. He can’t hear any more

of Mike's rambling; it's just making him embarrassed for Mike's sake. He clammers down off the shelf.

"Copy that, returning to base. Over and out."

Mike's still red and he can't forget the words that have come, uninvited, out of his mouth. Like vomit. He's pretty sure he never will forget them. They are permanently burned into his brain.

You can still smell me.

He sincerely wishes a hole would just open up in the earth at his feet. He would happily jump in. Immediately. Even if it led to the Upside Down.

But Eleven hasn't even noticed he's said anything odd. She's looking thoughtful instead, and he is profoundly grateful for that. For her.

"And then-you can smell me?"

She just wants to make sure she understands. She thinks he means that he will keep his Mike smell, and she will have an Eleven smell. She just needs to pick one that he likes as much as she likes his.

"Um. Yes. Yeah, I guess," he says. The awkwardness is trying to return but she seems unruffled. Happy, actually. And if she isn't embarrassed, why should he feel that way? She returns to sniffing bottles and he leans against the shelf, relieved. She inhales one slowly. It smells like a flower. It's not a very strong smell, like some of the others. Light. Clean. Nice. She likes it a lot, and hands it to Mike. He sniffs, then nods and hands it back to her. Smiles at her as she places it in the cart. It's a good smell. He wouldn't mind smelling it every day.

Neither would Eleven. Although the Mike smell is still her favorite. She smiles a little as they finally leave the aisle, to meet up with their friends and find Hopper. She forgets about the shampoo she's supposed to choose. When they approach the guys, Mike immediately notices the weird expressions on all three faces.

"Well, she's still walking with him," Lucas mumbles in Dustin's ear.

“Jesus Christ. I wonder why?” Dustin asks them honestly, before Will elbows him to shut the hell up. They all paste wide, artificial smiles on their faces and Mike gives them an odd look.

“What?”

“Nothing,” they say in unison.

Mike’s looking at them suspiciously but Dustin points over his head. “There’s Hopper! We’d better go. He looks pissed.” They all turn to regard Hopper, pushing a cart overflowing with groceries. Wheeler groceries, mostly. And Dustin’s right, he does look pissed. They hasten to join him.

Fifteen minutes and one very long line later, they’re finally back in the car. The groceries are in the trunk, and the kids are squeezed in the backseat. Hopper pulls the car around to the end of the parking lot and starts to turn right, back toward Mike’s.

“Shit,” Dustin exclaims angrily. “We forgot the ice cream.”

Hopper’s already in reverse.

He reverses all the way back to the front door and squeals to a stop. “Go,” he snaps at whoever is closest to the door. He doesn’t even care at this point. Lucas hurriedly exits the car. The others move to follow. “No! Just him.” They all settle back into their seats. Hopper heaves a huge breath. Counts to ten. He glances up in the mirror and sees Eleven watching him. She looks happy. She catches his eyes and smiles at him, and the irritation departs. He turns around and ruffles her short hair. She makes a face and he grins at her.

Twenty minutes later, they are finally back at the Wheeler’s. The groceries have been divided up. The Wheeler’s things are in the fridge, Hopper’s are in a separate bag to stay cool. Their nonperishables are still in the car. Dustin reverently places the ice cream into the freezer.

“I thought that was the whole point,” Hopper grumbles.

“It is! It got a little melted so I’m just refreezing it,” Dustin explains. Obviously. Hopper didn’t wait for his explanation; he’s already down

the stairs. He could really use a nap right now. Everyone follows him, and within minutes they're back to their original positions. Mike is sitting at the table with Eleven and Will. Will is drawing and Eleven is watching him. Lucas and Dustin are playing Clue, since Dustin lost Battleship almost immediately after resuming.

Mike is watching Eleven and Will out of the corner of his eye. Specifically, he's watching Eleven. The Snow Ball is in less than two weeks. If he's going to do it, he needs to do it soon. Before he manages to alienate her with his utter lameness. He's been working up his courage. Somehow it seemed so much easier last year. Before she disappeared for nearly a year. Before he thought she was dead, and had plenty of time to realize just how much she meant to him until he'd lost her. Now it just seems impossible. It's almost like the Snow Ball, or mentioning the Snow Ball, feels like a curse. He knows it's stupid but he can't help feeling that way. She disappeared literally minutes after he asked her. He tells himself that it won't happen again, he won't lose her again, but something is still standing in the way.

Eleven glances over at him and he hastily turns his head away, staring at the D&D manual on the floor instead. She watches him curiously, because there's an odd expression on his face. Sad and happy and scared all at once. She takes him in with her eyes. Sometimes it's just nice to look at him, since she was away for so long. Even though she could see him in her mind, it wasn't the same. His dark hair is getting longer. It's longer than hers, but she doesn't mind. It looks nice. He looks nice. Very pretty.

Eleven is still watching Mike and thinking about her list. Mike's name has always been at the top of the list, and she knows now what that means.

You're my favorite.

Mike jerks his chin to the right, toward her. Immediately. They stare at each other for a long moment. His eyes are wide and he looks surprised, as if she's spoken it aloud. But she didn't. Did she? She glances at Will but he's engrossed in his drawing. And Lucas and Dustin are still arguing. She didn't say anything, she just thought it. His dark eyes are still locked with hers and the look on his face

confuses her. He's watching her, like he's waiting for something. Something from her. She suddenly understands that he did hear her. Somehow. Oh no.

Mike's feeling pretty confused himself. He could have sworn that she spoke to him. Mentally. He heard her clearly. But Eleven is just staring at him in astonishment, so either he imagined it or she didn't mean to send it. He raises both eyebrows slightly, considering this. He's still staring at her and she suddenly looks horrified. She turns pink, and that is a first. He's never seen her blush before, maybe because she's usually not aware or concerned about things that cause blushes. Embarrassing things. She looks a little trapped, like a cornered animal.

She feels a little trapped. A lot trapped. She would like to leave now. It's her first time really feeling embarrassment in a social context, and the feeling puzzles her. Her hands are suddenly sweaty and her face feels hot because he heard her. And she didn't mean for him to hear her. She doesn't know how that happened, and that's the worst part. That means that it could happen again. Without her meaning to. She'll have to be careful. Maybe it happened because she was thinking too hard about him. Or he was thinking about her. Maybe they were thinking at each other, about each other, at the same time. The thought makes her feel both happy and nervous. Then she feels dismayed again, because what if he heard that, too? And what if he'd heard her think about his hair? Eleven isn't aware that she's having the perfectly normal thoughts of an embarrassed 12 year old girl. She's wanted to have normal thoughts for so long, but now she doesn't even recognize them as normal. She just knows her face feels hot and her hands are sweaty and she can't make eye contact with Mike. And that is most definitely not normal.

She remembers the day at the pet store very well. Mike's reaction to hearing her thoughts, and Eleven hearing his. She suddenly understands exactly how he was feeling. She just wants to leave now, but leaving abruptly would be not normal. Odd. They would notice. It would make the embarrassing feeling grow. The worst part is that Mike is usually the one that makes her feel comfortable, the one that helps her when she doesn't know what to do. Who will help her, if he can't? The question makes the trapped feeling a lot worse. It makes

her breathing unsteady.

Eleven's all eyes right now. She looks like she's about to cry and she's pink with mortification. Mike can tell she sent the thought by accident. She definitely did not intend for him to hear it, but he's glad he did. It makes him feel happy. Light, somehow. His heart is beating a little faster, like it did when he kissed her. When it seemed like she would kiss him. He suspected before, but now he knows. He knows where he falls on her list. Stronger than those feelings, though, is the protectiveness. Eleven is self-conscious and upset, and she obviously doesn't know what to do now, or how to act. She needs help.

The first step in helping her is to make sure no one else notices anything amiss. That would only make her feel worse. Mike casually glances around the room. Dustin and Lucas are squabbling over Clue and Will is focused on his art. Hopper is fast asleep. He's not sure if he should pretend like nothing happened, or if they should talk about it. Or maybe he should just ask if she's okay? He tries to think about what would make him feel better, if their situations were reversed.

Eleven?

She doesn't move. She's looking away from him.

El? Can you hear me?

Still nothing.

El. It's okay, really.

She's perfectly still, and he gives up. She can't hear him, not right now. Maybe he's doing it wrong, or maybe she's too upset for him to be able to get through. He has no idea how the hell this whole thing works anyway. Either way, it's time to move to plan B. He leans over and touches her arm. She jumps slightly and turns her face toward his, but doesn't actually look at him.

"Hey. You okay?" He asks it very quietly, so no one else will hear. She avoids eye contact and nods. He doesn't know what else to do without drawing everyone's attention. He stares at the top of her

head, frantically thinking. He's surprised-they both are-when Will speaks. He's still looking intently at his drawing, but the crayon in his hand is still.

"Maybe you guys could get some snacks?" he suggests quietly, not meeting their eyes. Keeps his attention focused on the paper in front of him. Mike is suddenly profoundly, absurdly grateful for Will, who has obviously noticed everything.

"Yes! Snacks. El, let's go get snacks, okay?" He jumps up from his chair immediately. Eleven glances at him, then at Will. Will doesn't make eye contact, so she reluctantly follows Mike up the stairs.

"Get the ice cream!" Dustin calls when they're almost out the door.

Mike holds the door open for Eleven and heads for the kitchen. She trails behind him. She's waiting for him to open the fridge or the snack cabinet, but he just leans against it instead. She hesitates near the fridge, well away from him. He's looking at her with concern, and it makes her feel strange. She examines the photos taped to the fridge, avoiding his eyes. She hears him sigh, and then he's suddenly right next to her.

"El. Are you okay?" She nods again.

"Um. It kind of seems like you're upset. Embarrassed. And you don't have to feel that way, there's nothing to be upset about."

She takes a quick peek at his face, still avoiding his eyes. "You heard me." It's almost a question.

"Well, yeah. I did. But it's okay."

"I didn't mean to."

"I figured. I mean, I know. But you don't need to feel bad about it."

She doesn't know how to respond. She doesn't have any words left. And she can't tell him with her eyes this time, because they can't meet his.

"Really! It's like...like what happened in the pet store. And, um. I felt

embarrassed, too, at first. Because you heard me. And I didn't mean for you to. But it was okay, right?" He wonders if he should bring up the whole smelling thing. When he'd made an ass out of himself by telling her she could smell him anytime she wanted. He shudders inwardly. That was certainly more humiliating than this, even though she isn't aware of it. He really, really doesn't want to draw any attention to it, though.

She shrugs one shoulder slightly.

"Yeah. It was. Because. Um." Now he's the one feeling embarrassed. He finds the courage to say it anyway, because it will make her feel better. "It was okay, because you didn't mind hearing me. Right? So that made me feel better."

"I didn't mind," she says, looking at her feet.

"I know. I didn't, either. Mind hearing you, I mean."

She's surprised into looking up, although she keeps her eyes fixed on his nose. It has freckles on it. She likes his freckles a lot.

"You didn't?"

"No! No. Of course not."

She's not sure how to respond to that. She still feels embarrassed, because he heard her accidentally. He heard something private. And he might have heard other private things, too.

Mike takes a deep, convulsive breath.

"I...I liked it."

She's startled into meeting his eyes, even though she didn't intend to. She checks them quickly for a lie, but they are dark and serious.

"...You did?"

"Yeah. Yes. A lot," he says, a little too emphatically, and she smiles.

He takes another deep breath. Then the words come out in a rush, before he can stop himself.

“You’re my favorite, too.”

“I...I am?”

He turns pink. That’s okay. It’s a nice color. A pretty color. She feels a little pink, too.

“Yeah. Of course,” he says, quietly. There’s a lot more that he wants to say, but he doesn’t know where to begin. How to begin. He wants to tell her that he thought about her every day she was gone. Every minute. That he missed her. That he never gave up on her. That he would still be waiting for her, even if she hadn’t come home. He’s already told her some of those things, but that was different. That was when she had just returned, and it felt more natural to say them. He wants to tell her that he’s never felt the way he feels about her, and that he’ll never feel it again. He just knows that, somehow. He wants to say a lot of sappy and cheesy things, and knows they won’t feel sappy or cheesy because they’re also true things. He can’t bring himself to say any of them, though, and that makes him sigh. At the very least, he wants to ask her to the Snow Ball.

He realizes he’s just been staring at her for at least a minute. It’s okay, though, because she’s doing it, too. She’s looking at him the same way she did when she left to close the gate. When it seemed like she would kiss him. He suddenly realizes that he’s standing a lot closer to her than before. Her dark eyes are even larger because they’re so near. Her lips look really soft. And they are suddenly inches away from his own. He isn’t sure how that happened, but he is definitely okay with it.

“Oh, Jesus.”

Mike and Eleven spring apart. Dustin is staring at them with a mixture of jubilation and disgust.

“We are right downstairs, guys. Right there. Seriously. Can’t you just, like, wait until we’re gone?” He sees the frozen expression on Eleven’s face and relents slightly. “I just came to check on you, seeing as how you’ve been up here for like, ever, but obviously you’re both okay,” he says, grinning. He’s already rummaging in the freezer.

“Oh, and Mike.”

“What?”

Dustin is staring at him meaningfully, a question written all over his face. It seems like they've all picked up this silent form of communication from Eleven. Dustin might not have any telekinetic or telepathic powers, but Mike knows exactly what he's asking, anyway. He shakes his head slightly and looks at his friend, trying to convey the message that Dustin should vacate the room. Posthaste. Dustin doesn't seem to pick up on it, or he's ignoring it. Either one is a possibility with Dustin. Dustin sighs dramatically instead. Rolls his eyes.

“Seriously?”

Mike doesn't say anything, but Eleven's looking at them both curiously. She doesn't understand exactly what's happening, but she senses they're both irritated. She hopes they aren't mad at her.

“But you almost...and still? Nothing?”

Mike shakes his head, more forcefully this time. Using his own form of silent communication.

Shut the hell up.

“You're an idiot. You are such an idiot. I swear. I have been patient. I have been like, really patient. A model of patience, in fact. But this is it, man. I can't take this anymore,” Dustin moans. He tries to run a hand through his hair and his hat falls off. Dustin doesn't even notice. He unceremoniously drops the ice cream carton on the counter and moves closer to them.

“Okay. Let me handle this.”

“Dustin! We will be down in a second!” Mike's unusually twitchy, Dustin notes with amusement. And Mike can be pretty damn twitchy sometimes.

“No. You had your chance, man. Like, weeks. Weeks worth of chances.”

“Dustin!”

“Shut up. I’ve got this,” he says, pushing Mike away from him easily when he lunges. He holds Mike in place with one hand and moves around him, in front of Eleven, who is watching them with alarm.

“El.”

“Dustin!”

Dustin leaves one arm on Mike to both keep him out of the way but also trapped in the room, ignoring the repeated punches to his back. Eleven isn’t sure what to do. Should she use her power to separate them? What is wrong with them?

“Chill out, Mike,” Dustin says as Mike makes another pathetic bid for freedom. “You look like an idiot. Seriously. El.”

“Yes?”

“Want to go to the Snow Ball with me?”

Mike stops trying to hit him. His hand drops away limply and his mouth falls open in astonishment and Eleven looks nearly as surprised as Mike.

“What?” Mike yells, stricken.

“What?” Dustin asks him calmly.

“You...you want to go to the Snow Ball with Eleven?”

“Yep.”

“You want to go with Eleven?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“We’re bonded for life, dude. It can’t be helped. Sorry,” he adds as an afterthought. Eleven has noticed that, although they are both talking about her, neither one of them is actually paying her a bit of

attention. And Mike looks funny. Sick and angry and humiliated at the same time.

“Do you have a problem with that, Michael?”

“I...you...” Mike trails off incoherently. Dustin gives him a good thirty seconds to resume, but apparently that’s the best Mike can do.

“I see. Okay then. El-”

“Yes!”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I have a problem with it. You can’t take Eleven to the Snow Ball, Dustin,” Mike growls.

“Why not? No one else has asked her, right? Right, El? Right, Michael?” Dustin gestures with an upraised hand, as if to say, what the fuck are you waiting for, exactly?

Mike is furious with Dustin. He knows very well that Dustin isn’t interested in Eleven, not in that way. He’s just trying to force Mike to ask her instead. And he will ask her. Eventually. When the timing is right. He has put a lot of thought into it and tried to come up with a game plan, and it sure as hell isn’t supposed to happen like this. Eleven looks fucking terrified, for one thing. Terror is not exactly conducive to romance.

“Dustin. You are ruining everything,” Mike hisses at him.

“Shut up, Mike. If no one else has asked her,” Dustin yells, glaring pointedly at Mike, “why shouldn’t I? So I’ll go with her. If she wants to go with me, that is.”

They both finally seem to remember that Eleven is still in the room with them and they turn to her at the same time. Mike has a frantic look on his face and Dustin looks smug. They both stare at her as if waiting for her to do something and she doesn’t know what they want. She has that trapped look on her face again. She has no idea what’s happening but she’s beginning to wish she’d stayed at home. And that’s the most confusing aspect to this whole situation, because

she has never wished to be anywhere other than with her friends.

“What do you say, El? Want to be my date?”

Mike is bouncing on his feet with irritation and it's a little scary. She looks at Dustin hesitantly. She knows how much he wants a date to the Snow Ball, because he told her, but she doesn't know what to say. What to do. She just stares at them blankly until Mike takes over.

“No. She does not want to be your date, Dustin.”

“Don’t answer for her!”

“I wasn’t! I just meant that I...um.”

“Yes?”

“You know that I’m...that I...”

“JESUS WILL YOU JUST DO IT. I AM SERIOUSLY DYING OF OLD AGE HERE. REALLY. I CAN FEEL A WRINKLE FORMING, AS WE SPEAK.”

“SHUT UP.”

Mike and Dustin are glaring daggers at each other. Eleven is seriously considering using her power to freeze them both, because they are obviously very angry and she can’t think of what else to do.

“If you have a problem with it, Michael, maybe you should, oh, I don’t know, do something about it? Hmm? Or I will seriously take her to the ball.” He gives Eleven a reassuring look. “If she wants to go, that is.”

Mike snarls at him and turns to Eleven. She takes a step back because his face is white with fury. He sees the fear and confusion on her face and softens. Takes a deep breath. Tries to rearrange his expression into something a little less murderous because this is not fucking romantic at all. This is actually terrible.

“Eleven,” he starts. Doesn’t finish.

“Mike?”

Mike turns to glare at Dustin again. “I don’t need an audience, Dustin.” Dustin rummages around in the cutlery drawer for a spoon. He pries the lid off the ice cream and digs in.

“Uh, yeah. I think you do,” Dustin says around a mouthful of chocolate. Mike makes a strangled noise and faces Eleven again, trying to relax his face. She’s still looking at him with alarm, so apparently it’s not working. He attempts a smile, and she smiles back at him tentatively. That’s an improvement, anyway. He hates asking her like this, with Dustin watching and eating ice cream like he’s watching a fucking TV show. He fervently hopes that she won’t think he’s being forced into asking her. Although he is. Sort of.

“Eleven.”

“...yes?”

“Do you...will you. Um.”

“Jesus.”

“Shut up, Dustin!” Mike takes another calming breath. Tries to keep a slightly more pleasant expression glued to his face. “Do you...want to...um. Go to the Snow Ball?” he finally asks her.

Finally. He finds that he can’t actually look at her, so he fixes his gaze on the air next to her instead. She glances from him to Dustin, completely baffled. Is he asking her if she wants to go with Dustin?

“...With Dustin?” she asks slowly, and Mike’s mouth falls open again.

“No! No! No. Not with Dustin. With me.”

Dustin is giving him a slow, sarcastic clap, and Mike turns his back on him completely. Asshole.

“...Oh.”

She gazes at Dustin again, not wanting to hurt him, since he did ask her first. And he did tell her how much he wanted a date for the

Snow Ball. She doesn't want to hurt his feelings.

Dustin doesn't seem to understand her questioning look. He just waves his spoon at her cheerily.

Mike seems to understand, though. He usually does.

"You don't have to go with Dustin, just because he asked. He doesn't actually want to go with you." That doesn't come out the way he intended, but she doesn't seem to notice the insult. Thank God.

"He...he doesn't?"

"Hey! We would have totally had fun," Dustin informs them both.

"No. He was just, um, trying to get me to ask you. Since I've been wanting to."

"For like, a year," Dustin mumbles.

"But, um. I couldn't. So he thought that if he asked you, I'd finally do it," Mike clarifies, since he's still waiting for an answer. The lack of any kind of a response is making him feel a little sick. He also feels protective, because he doesn't want her to feel like she has to do anything she doesn't want to. Even if it's something he wants. He adds softly, "I mean, you don't have to go with me either, if you don't want to."

"I want to," she says immediately and he suddenly feels a little dizzy, as if he's inhaled too much soap.

"You...you do?"

"Yes. Promise."

The dizziness gets worse, but that's okay. It feels good, actually. Great. They smile at each other. Dustin can tell they've forgotten him completely. He scoops another spoonful into his mouth, watching the shmoopy look on Mike's face as they stare at each other. Mike is grinning that wide, idiotic smile again. It's still creepy.

"About freaking time, man," Dustin says, but Mike doesn't even look over. "I mean, seriously. You thought she would say no? Seriously?

You guys were about to kiss when I came in! You're such an idiot," he says, but he tempers the words by clapping Mike on the back. "And congrats." Mike beams at him happily and Dustin represses a shudder. Jesus. No one should look that happy. It just makes him look a little insane, actually. He hurriedly grabs some bowls and a handful of spoons, ready to beat a hasty retreat. His work here is done. His hand is on the knob when he turns back toward Eleven.

"El. Seriously. Last chance. I would be the most awesome date ever," he teases. She smiles and shakes her head.

"You sure? I mean, just my opinion, but you can do a hell of a lot better than Wheeler here."

"Gee, thanks," Mike says, but he's smiling.

"No."

"No?"

"No." Her voice is firm.

"You can't do better than Mike?"

"Mike is best," she tells him simply. Mike's looking a little delirious again, Dustin notices. It's kind of sickening but he's happy for him anyway. Happy for them both. He waves the ice cream carton at them and opens the door, but doesn't descend. Lucas is heading up the stairs. He's on the first riser when he sees Dustin watching him and comes to a halt.

"Uh, what the hell is taking so long? You've been gone for like, ten minutes," Lucas snaps at him. "We're waiting. What the hell is the hold-up? There better be monsters. Are there monsters, Dustin?"

"Yes," Dustin answers, but he sounds nonchalant.

"What? Seriously? Monsters?"

"A love monster," Dustin coos. Lucas peers around his friend into the kitchen. Sees his other friends, gazing at each other with sappy expressions on their faces.

“Jesus. Gross.” He’s already halfway down the stairs again, shaking his head in disgust.

Dustin heads back downstairs as well, arms full. He didn’t bring enough bowls and spoons for them, because he figures the ice cream will be melted again by the time they rejoin their friends. Mike and Eleven haven’t even noticed his departure. Mike is still fixated on the last thing she said. That he was best.

“Yeah?” Mike asks her, as if she has just spoken. He smiles into her eyes.

“Yes. You’re my favorite.”